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ABSTRACT

Because of the lack of research on the Khmer people in the United States, and because the Khmer have arrived here so recently, this paper describes itself as "less a state of the art analysis of Khmer resettlement and more of a speculation on their condition calling for more research." After an introductory section, the paper describes the two major exoduses of Khmer refugees to Thailand in 1975 and 1979 and the three waves of refugees resettled in the United States. The changing characteristics of the refugees in these three waves are also described. Following this comes a discussion of differences in the refugee experiences of the different exodus groups and resettlement waves, both before and after coming to this country. (Differences between the Khmer refugees and traditional refugees are also discussed.) Four major adjustment problems are examined: illiteracy and low levels of education; lack of English language ability; mental health problems; and poorly transferable occupational skills (in the context of which the Khmer Guided Placement Program is examined). Tables at the end of the document provide data on yearly Khmer arrivals (1975-82), educational levels, English proficiency levels, and employment status (1975-81). (CMG)

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RESETTLEMENT OF KHMER REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

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RESETTLEMENT OF KHMER REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

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Paper prepared for presentation at a conference on "Kampuchea in the 1980's: Prospects and Problems," Princeton University, 12-14 November 1982.

In Thailand or straddling its border with Kampuchea there are approximately 250-300,000 Khmer refugees. They are in two groups, only one of which is eligible for resettlement to the United States or other countries.[1] Those Khmer refugees in border camps, estimated to number 150-200,000 people, are treated by the Thai government as if they were still in Kampuchea. As a result the international agency responsible for refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has been unable to extend its protection to the border refugees and these refugees are not eligible for resettlement. Another 84,568 Khmer refugees (as of 31 August 1982) are in holding camps inside Thailand (Ban Kaeng, Surin, Phanat Nikhom, Khao I Dang, Kamput) and are eligible for resettlement. This group, however, is under occasional pressure by Thailand to leave the holding camps and "voluntarily repatriate" to the border camps (Hamilton, 1982).

There are approximately 77,000 Khmer refugees resettled in the United States as of 31 August 1982. Another 4,223 refugees were in the Bataan and Galang Refugee Processing Centers awaiting transit to the United States (Department of State, 1982). Of the approximately 85,000 Khmer refugees eligible for resettlement it is not possible to predict how many will eventually be resettled. In 1982 approximately 21,000 Khmer refugees in the holding centers were singled out for possible resettlement in the United States. Of these refugees approximately 12,000 were approved by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for resettlement and will arrive in the United States in late 1982 and during 1983.

As Table 1 indicates Khmer refugees have been in the United States since the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975, but in the first four years, 1975-1978, only a trickle (6,299) entered. In one month, September 1981, more Khmer refugees (8,857) entered the United States than in the first four years. It took the

dramatic events of 1979, particularly the forced repatriation of some 40,000 Khmer refugees from Thailand to Kampuchea and the Boat People crisis to increase public and governmental interest and to produce substantially increased Indochinese (including Khmer) refugee admissions. Nonetheless, despite the invasion of Kampuchea by Vietnam and the subsequent famine, admissions of Khmer refugees in 1979 (10,333) and 1980 (13,079) were relatively low compared to total admissions of Indochinese refugees (66,188 and 150,720 respectively).

Many factors operated to keep Khmer resettlement low. For a long time there has been a hope that voluntary repatriation would be possible for large numbers of Khmer. Furthermore many of the Khmer refugees had little connection to the United States; the war in Cambodia was far shorter than in Laos or Vietnam and relatively few Khmer worked for the United States or for American corporations. Thus the Khmer refugees had difficulty in being selected for resettlement by a system which gave priority to those refugees with connections to American interests or who had relatives in the States.

Very little has been written about Khmer refugees in the United States. The briefer involvement in Cambodia meant that fewer American servicemen, government officials and scholars developed close ties to the land and its people. The much larger simultaneous refugee flows from Vietnam (420,000) and Laos (133,000) have produced many studies but the Khmer refugees have been relatively neglected. In addition, other events involving Kampuchea -- the Vietnamese invasion and the continuing warfare, the horrors of the Pol Pot period, the famine, and the shifting of political forces--have been more dramatic than the resettlement of Khmer refugees. As a result, most people who have an interest in the Khmer people and in Kampuchea have focussed mainly on events other than resettlement.

Almost all of what follows, therefore, is highly impressionistic. It draws heavily on interviews with personnel in the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations

(CMAAs), the Department of State, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Office of the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, the voluntary resettlement agencies, and elsewhere. The opinions expressed in the interviews were in substantial agreement but that may simply mean an erroneous view is widespread.

In trying to describe Khmer resettlement in the United States one is further handicapped by the recent arrival of the refugees. The great majority have not been here long enough to put down roots. They are still in the early part of their transition. If there was good information about the progress of the 1975 arrivals one might be tempted to simply assume a similar process for the newest arrivals, but in this case very little is known about those who have been here for six or seven years.

This leaves three ways to approach the subject. First, wide use of the impressionistic material with a clear recognition of its limitations. Second, the resettlement of Khmer refugees has taken place as an integral part of a larger resettlement program, that of the Indochinese refugees--refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Use of material on Indochinese refugees or on some of the other ethnic groups that are the constituent parts of that refugee exodus can provide insights into the experience of the Khmer refugees. It is necessary when using such Indochinese, but not specifically Khmer, materials either to assume the Khmer refugees are similar to their fellow exiles or to point out known divergencies. Lastly, we can get some insights into the Khmer refugee experience by relying on refugee patterns drawn from the general refugee literature. The description that follows is a mix of all three approaches. This article is less a state of the art analysis of Khmer resettlement and more of a speculation on their condition calling for more research.

WHO ARE THE KHMER REFUGEES?

There have been two major exoduses of Khmer refugees to Thailand and three

different waves of Khmer refugees resettled in the United States.

Exodus. The first flight from Kampuchea occurred at the time of the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975. Approximately 35-40,000 refugees fled from Phnom Penh and other urban centers as well as from small towns and rural areas near Thailand. The imposition of communist rule over the whole country then greatly reduced the possibility of flight. Over the next few years only a trickle of refugees reached Thailand from Kampuchea.[2]

The second major exodus from Kampuchea occurred from early 1979 through the start of spring 1980. This was a disrupted rather than a steady flow. The Vietnamese invasion and the collapse of Khmer Rouge control opened the border for the first time in almost four years. In the first third of 1979 approximately 100,000 refugees fled into Thailand or to the border region. In May and June 1979, Thailand forcibly repatriated approximately 40,000 Khmer refugees many of whom subsequently died in border minefields or from starvation and disease.[3]

When the flow resumed in the summer of 1979 there was an added danger impelling flight from Kampuchea. Famine was added to the list of reasons for flight which included the horrors of the Pol Pot years, the Vietnamese invasion and the ongoing struggle against the occupation waged by the weakened Khmer Rouge forces, and opposition to communism of all varieties. The total flow that achieved sanctuary inside Thailand between early 1979 and spring 1980 was approximately 165,000 refugees. In addition, approximately 500,000 Khmer refugees and displaced persons ended up in camps on the Thai-Kampuchea border.

The composition of both refugee exoduses was essentially similar. Both Khmer groups were heterogeneous, urban and rural, business, professionals and peasants, educated and illiterate refugees. The 1975 cohort also included a significant number of high-level government officials and military officers. Overall, it appears more of the refugees were of rural than urban origin (Kanthoul, 1982; Hamilton, 1982).

Resettlement. Resettlement of Cambodian refugees has taken place in three waves each having different demographic characteristics and resettlement experiences. These differences are due to changes in the resettlement admission policies of the United States.

Between 1975 and 1978 the United States resettled 6,299 Khmer refugees. This first resettlement wave was selected on the basis of criteria that favored those Khmer refugees who had connections to the United States or to the war effort in Cambodia. As a result those who were resettled tended to be better educated and more urban than was typical of subsequent groups. While the urban, educated refugees with connections to America were resettled, most of the rural Khmer refugees were left in refugee camps in Thailand. (Between 1975 and 1979 approximately 12,500 of the Khmer who fled in 1975 were resettled in other countries, primarily to France, the former colonial ruler of Cambodia.)

The succession of Indochinese refugee crises beginning in mid 1978 produced changes in resettlement policies in the United States and elsewhere. United States resettlement admissions numbers were increased ten fold, to a total of 168,000 refugees annually, in little more than a year. This figure was for all Indochinese refugees including the Khmer. Changes were also made in the criteria for selecting refugees for resettlement. As a result approximately 10,000 Khmer refugees, who had little connection to the United States and who had languished in refugee camps since 1975, were resettled in 1979. This second wave of Khmer refugees resettled in the United States consisted mainly of the rural less-educated Khmer refugees who had been left in the refugee camps since their flight in 1975.

The third Khmer resettlement wave consists of those refugees resettled in the United States since early 1980. This is the largest of the three waves.

Between January 1, 1980 and August 31, 1982 approximately 60,000 Khmer were resettled. This is approximately 75% of all Khmer resettled in the United States. The first two resettlement waves consisted of refugees who fled at the time of the Khmer Rouge takeover. This third wave, however, consisted of refugees who experienced and survived the years of Pol Pot's tyranny. This wave is drawn from the second exodus from Kampuchea, the 165,000 refugees who had received asylum in Thailand in 1979 and early 1980.

Surveys. Several surveys were conducted on Cambodian refugees in the United States from 1978 to late 1980. These surveys, see Table 2, illustrate the changing characteristics of the Khmer refugees. Survey I, based on 1975 United States arrivals, shows a much higher level of education--46.7% of the Khmer refugees surveyed had secondary degrees or university educations--than does Survey IV, based on all arrivals from 1975 to 1980 but consisting mostly of refugees who arrived in 1979 and 1980, which indicates less education in Cambodia--only 24.5% had gone to secondary school or beyond. Another study, of refugees in the language programs at the Bataan Refugee Processing Center, shows that 47% of the Khmer refugees--from the 1979 exodus cohort-- are placed in classes for refugees who are illiterate in their native language (Forbes and Spector, 1982).

Another difference between the 1975 arrivals in the United States and those arriving after 1979 is the increased number of households headed by women. In Survey I only 6 of 131 households were headed by women but in Survey IV 37 of 179 households were headed by women--many of whom are believed to be widows. This increase in women headed households may be a result of the years of Khmer Rouge Tyranny.

THE KHMER REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Perhaps our most important information about the Khmer refugees is our knowledge of what they have experienced. The experiences of refugees--before, during and after flight and resettlement--have an impact on their progress during resettlement. The different exodus groups and resettlement waves have had varying refugee experiences.

Those in the first exodus group who were left behind in Thailand and who later formed the second resettlement wave had to wait for three or more years in refugee camps before being resettled to the United States. This group consisted mostly of rural Khmer, peasants and fisherman. While they were in the refugee camps these refugees received few services--English language training, orientation to American culture--to prepare them for life in the United States.

The second exodus group, which later became the third resettlement wave, experienced the horrors, traumas and deprivations of the Pol Pot years of tyranny plus the Vietnamese invasion and the subsequent famine. Many members of this wave have witnessed and been the victims of atrocities. Many families are incomplete with the fate of loved ones either unknown or too vividly known. During these years education ceased to exist in Kampuchea and many careers were interrupted.

The resettlement experience of the third Khmer resettlement wave, those who arrived in the United States since early 1980, also has been different from that of the earlier arrivals. Almost all of the third wave Khmer have passed through the Indochinese Refugee Processing Centers (RPC) at Bataan or Galang. The RPCs were established in 1980 because it was found that earlier Indochinese refugee arrivals were poorly prepared for life in the United States. At the RPCs refugees receive fourteen weeks of intensive English as a Second Language and Cultural Orientation (ESL/CO) before being resettled in the United States. (The first two Khmer resettlement waves received no preparation for American life, however, the first wave consisting of relatively well-educated urban Khmer with American connections had a limited knowledge of Western lifestyles and some modest English language ability.)

In addition to the RPCs approximately 8000 third wave Khmer refugees who arrived mainly in 1981 benefited from an experimental resettlement program, the Khmer Cluster Resettlement Project. The project, also known as the Khmer Guided Placement (KGP) project, had an impact not only on the 8,000 refugees who directly

participated but also on some 20,000 other third wave Khmer who were resettled at the same time.

The impetus for KGP came from the perception that overly heavy concentrations of Indochinese refugees in certain areas of the country, "impacted" areas, were causing problems in delivery of services to refugees and in community relations. Impacted areas were the result of many refugees being reunified with their families and of the movement, secondary migration, of Indochinese refugees from their places of initial resettlement to areas where there were concentrations of their ethnic group. The guided placement idea was to steer refugees away from impacted areas and to create new ethnic communities that would be sufficiently attractive to reduce secondary migration. The Khmer refugees were chosen for the project because the number of them already in the country was relatively small (27,000 at the end of 1980), because a large influx of about 20,000 Khmer was anticipated, and because among the Khmer there was a high proportion of "free cases"--refugees without close relatives in this country (Granville, 1982; Coleman, 1982).

KGP involved cooperation between the Khmer community--represented by local Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations--voluntary resettlement agencies, state and local governments, and Federal refugee agencies. The goal was to facilitate successful resettlement of KGP Khmer refugees in non-impacted areas. By providing better resettlement services, a hospitable community climate, and achievement of high levels of refugee self sufficiency it was hoped that new stable--low secondary migration--Cambodian communities could be developed. Twelve non-impacted cities were selected to receive from 300 to 1,000 KGP refugees. KGP was notable for its sensitivity to ethnic and cultural needs of the refugees through the involvement of the Cambodian Association of America and KGP's support of local Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations (Refugee Resource Center, 1982; Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association Project, 1982).

NEW REFUGEES AND TRADITIONAL REFUGEES

In recent years, particularly since the beginning of the Indochinese refugee influx in 1975, the United States has been admitting large numbers of refugees who present an array of problems not previously encountered in resettlement programs. The Khmer refugees, and the other Indochinese refugees, are "new" refugees who differ greatly from the types of refugees who have been traditionally resettled--eastern Europeans--in this country. The key differences between the traditional refugees and the more recent refugee groups are that the latter are from less developed countries; are ethnically and culturally vastly different from their hosts; and the new refugees are likely to lack kin--potential support groups--in the country of resettlement. Traditional refugees, on the contrary, come from societies whose level of development is similar to the hosts, are culturally and ethnically similar to the host, and are likely to be welcomed and assisted by well-established kinfolk who know the traditional refugee's language and can cushion their adjustment and assimilation. The Khmer refugees arriving since 1975 are the first significant community of Khmer in America. The more recent Khmer refugee arrivals are assisted by Cambodian communities, as in KGP, that have less than a decade of experience in the United States. In terms of economic development and material wealth--and the cultural values associated with levels of development--Cambodia and the United States are at the extreme and opposite ends of the scale.

All three waves of Khmer refugees resettled in the United States have had to confront the shocks of adjusting to a developed society but the impact has not struck each wave in the same way. The first resettlement wave in 1975 was an urban and educated cohort that had a limited knowledge of modern lifestyles, some English language ability, some modest financial resources, and even a few American friends. Their knowledge of American culture and English was, however, mostly confined to the male heads of households, and even for them it was limited. Resettlement was a shock for the first wave but, due to the above advantages,

there is a widespread impression that their resettlement has gone better than that of the later waves.

The second wave, arriving around 1979--the peasants and fishermen with little education and few connections to America--has experienced tremendous resettlement problems. Neither their prior life in Cambodia nor their years in the refugee camps in Thailand prepared them for life in the United States. There were few Cambodian-specific resettlement programs or projects to assist the second wave; due to the numerical predominance of the Vietnamese being resettled in 1979 and 1980 most Indochinese resettlement projects had a Vietnamese-specific tilt.

The third Khmer resettlement wave, entering since early 1980, consists of a mix of Cambodian backgrounds but tends to be a group with limited education or experience of urban life. This group, however, has benefited from the trials and traumas of the prior Indochinese and Khmer arrivals in two major ways. First, the difficulties of adjustment experienced by all Indochinese refugees resettled from 1975 to 1980 led to the development of intensive English as a Second Language and Cultural Orientation (ESL/CO) programs conducted in Asia to prepare the refugees for resettlement. The ESL/CO programs are meant to facilitate the refugees transition and accelerate their achievement of self-sufficiency. The topics covered in the cultural orientation program illustrate the range of difficulties encountered by refugees from less developed countries: personal identification, sponsorship and resettlement, clothing, housing, food, transportation, communication, employment, health and sanitation, banking, community services, and American lifestyles (Center for Applied Linquistics, 1982).

In addition, the third Khmer wave benefited from the presence of the Khmer refugees who arrived before them. The Khmer community, themselves refugees and newcomers, was an important resource for their newly arrived compatriots. The Cambodian mutual assistance associations, active in KGP or in older Khmer

concentrations, provided services and comfort to the most recent wave. The third wave has many problems--most of which are shared by all Indochinese refugees--but the impression is that they have done better than the second wave, the mostly rural 1979 arrivals, and some may eventually do as well as the 1975 Khmer first wave.

ADJUSTMENT

The Khmer in the United States, both as refugees and as newcomers from a less developed society, have had to confront numerous problems and difficulties. These include: illiteracy and low levels of education; lack of English language ability; poorly transferable occupational skills; and problems of mental health and adjustment. Each of these problems alone could be a major obstacle to adjustment. When they interact, when they are extensive and severe, the difficulties are multiplied and compounded.

Education. As noted above and in Table 2 many of the Khmer refugees have had little or no education. Survey IV, the most recent survey, samples refugees from all three resettlement waves and thus is the most comprehensive. However, because this survey was conducted in late 1980, before the resettlement of most of the third wave, its coverage is incomplete and the sample was drawn from less than half of the Khmer refugees now in the United States. This survey indicates that 37% of the refugees had no education and that almost three-quarters of them had junior high school or less education. In addition, because this was a survey of the heads of households, it is likely that this survey shows a higher level of education than would be shown if all adult refugees had been included in the sample.

Educational level has obvious implications for adjustment to American life. Illiteracy in one's native language is often associated with other characteristics such as level of exposure to urban life or Western technology and values, and

previous formal education or work experiences relevant to an industrialized economy. Illiteracy means that refugees have one more thing to learn before getting to the basics of the American culture and workplace.

English. Language ability is a major obstacle to adjustment. Learning a foreign language is particularly difficult for those who are illiterate and have had no exposure to formal educational settings. One study of a similar Indochinese refugee group--the Hmong--in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes found "the non-literate subjects...learned very little, if anything at all, from the program (Robson, 1982)." It is believed that it may be desirable to first promote literacy in a non-literate's native language as a preliminary to ESL. Further even literate Khmer refugees have difficulties with a Roman alphabet and a language structure unrelated to Khmer. As Table 3 shows, the percentage of Khmer refugees indicating they understand English well has not exceeded 30.3% and it dropped sharply in Survey IV--which included large numbers of rural Khmer who were new arrivals-- to 20.9%.

As was noted above in the third resettlement wave an increased number of households are headed by women. They have additional hardships in learning English because women in Cambodia were less likely to be educated and because as heads of household in the United States the women--particular those with children--have difficulty in finding the time and means to attend ESL classes (Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations Project, 1982).

Occupational Adjustment.

The Khmer refugees, particularly the more recent arrivals of the second and third resettlement waves, and in common with the other Indochinese refugee groups,

have had severe problems making an occupational and economic adjustment in the United States. In part this is not unexpected; refugee groups normally experience a sharp initial drop in their economic fortunes followed by substantial improvement during their first decade in a new land (Stein, 1979). The evidence indicates that the Khmer refugees have experienced a sharp decline in terms of high unemployment, however it is too early to know if they are following or will follow the pattern of substantial improvement. Recent survey information from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR, 1982) in the Department of Health and Human Services show that only 41.6% of the Khmer refugee adults are in the labor force and of these 77.8% are employed. The welfare usage rate of the Khmer refugees is 47.9. These figures are based on imcomplete samples and both the figures and their interpretation have been challenged (Refugee Policy Group, 1982). Nevertheless, the general picture of high unemployment, low labor force participation and high welfare usage holds.

However, it must be recalled that the Khmer refugees are very recent arrivals in the United States, less than 10% have been here for more than five years and over 60% have been here less than two years. Furthermore, Indochinese refugees newly arrived in the United States are eligible for 18 months of cash and medical assistance and this may retard their labor force participation and affect their employment and welfare usage rates.

There are major obstacles confronting the Khmer refugees as they try to make an occupational and economic adjustment. Besides the lack of education and English language ability the skills of the Khmer refugees--even those who are educated and had skilled or high occupational status in Cambodia--do not fit well into the American labor market. Despite a similarity of job titles between Kampuchea and the United States, the Khmer refugees do not have

the skills needed to successfully transfer to similar occupations here. Data from the fourth survey of Khmer refugees indicates that 63% had white-collar occupations in Kampuchea, however, 70% of the same sample had a junior high school or lower education (Opportunity Systems, 1981).

The almost two-thirds of the Khmer refugees who had white-collar status in Kampuchea have experienced major difficulties in their adjustment. There is a mis-match between their skills and their expectations. (Some skills which meet international standards--medicine, science, mechanical arts--transfer well; others which are culturally specific--lawyer, politican, artisan--transfer poorly.) Although they lack transferable skills many refugees cling overly long to the hope that they can restore their occupational and social status in exile. They do not want to lose anything because of their flight and resist accepting jobs that lack status and that represent underemployment--for example, a physican working as a pharmacists aide or a lawyer as a clerk.

Many refugees put great hope in ESL and training programs as the avenue to upward mobility and restored status. Many training programs, however, produce poor results particularly if the refugees have weak language skills. There is an impression that for many Indochinese refugees these programs become a refuge in order to avoid facing an unpleasant reality. Because of their abilities and knowledge of urban life the former white-collar Khmer refugees may be able to make a successful economic adjustment even if they cannot restore their former status. In the last published survey, done in late 1980, 36.4% of the Khmer refugees held white-collar jobs (Opportunity Systems, 1981).

The high level of welfare usage by the Khmer refugees, and other Indochinese refugees is worrisome, but it is by no means clear that they are becoming a permanently dependent population. Khmer refugees are eligible for 18 months of economic assistance to help them make a transition to self-sufficiency. Many of the 1975 Indochinese refugees successfully used welfare as a means to acquire

training, learn English and become independent (ORR, 1982). There are major differences between the 1975 arrivals and the recent refugees, and the general United States unemployment rate is higher now, so one cannot be certain whether or not the latest cohort will follow the same pattern at the same pace.

Khmer Guided Placement (KGP)

A factor in the adjustment of the Khmer refugees is the KGP which assisted 8000 Khmer refugees during 1981. The focus on KGP was on early employment and self-sufficiency through the cooperative efforts of Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations (CMAA), voluntary agencies and state and local authorities. The Khmer refugees were given a clear and consistent message that they were expected to work and that their progress might affect the number of Khmer resettled in the future. (Many refugees, not only Khmer, view the 18 months of available welfare as an entitlement and delay their job hunt until after this period.) This message, reportedly, also spilled over to many non-KGP Khmer who were resettled at the same time.

The twelve KGP clusters were supposed to have better coordinated employment services for the Khmer refugees plus extra staffing and social and cultural services. Besides earlier employment and better progress toward self-sufficiency the clusters were to become new Khmer communities able to hold their residents and reduce secondary migration to older "impacted" Khmer communities. (Over one-third of all Khmer in the United States are believed to be in southern California with Long Beach as the main community. Texas, Washington State and Oregon also have large Khmer communities.)

KGP Clusters

Atlanta	766	Houston	1148
Boston	994	Jacksonville	267
Chicago	716	New York City	1302
Cincinnati	169	Phoenix	394
Columbus	358	Richmond	465
Dallas	1269	Rochester	157

Early reports (Coleman, 1982; Refugee Resource Center, 1982; Granville, 1982) on KGP indicate mixed results with about half of the sites described as successful. Financial data on the Khmer refugees in the project showed 47% were fully employed or supported by someone with a job. This is good progress for refugees who had been here only six months or less. It is not clear if secondary migration was substantially reduced by KGP. Two factors affected secondary migration. Some Sino-Khmer were included in the clusters but they did not fit within the Khmer ethnic community. Also some of the Khmer "free cases"--no close relatives elsewhere--moved to be near distant relatives; for Khmer whose families had been decimated even distant relatives are significant.

The careful planning for KGP was upset by refugee processing delays in Southeast Asia. At first only a fraction of the refugees trickled in and then in August and September 1981 a flood arrived. Half of the Khmer KGP refugees came in those two months, along with a large increased flow of other Indochinese refugee groups. These large numbers--23,000 Indochinese refugees in September 1981 alone--put a tremendous strain on the entire resettlement system.

Mental Health

There are only a few references to mental health and adjustment problems among Khmer refugees (Granville, 1982; Tobin et. al, 1981; Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations Project, 1981) however, considering the great traumas they have suffered it would be surprising if large numbers of Khmer refugees did not have some problems. Therefore, what follows, although supported by the impressions of those who work closely with Khmer refugees, is based on the general refugee literature and not materials specific to Khmer mental health problems (Tobin et.al., 1981).

Refugees--and others--who experience severe trauma and loss frequently show symptons of mental illness such as severe depression, paranoia, anxiety, and somatic and nostalgic reactions. Often these symptoms appear as a cluster

in victims of catastrophies and disasters and in refugees, and this combination has been labelled the "trauma syndrome" (Cohon, 1981). The behavioral changes of the trauma syndrome are complex, some changes are long-lasting, others are brief; some of the reactions can cause dysfunction, others are neutral or even facilitate adjustment. The Khmer refugees, particularly those who suffered the tyranny of Pol Pot, the Vietnamese invasion and the subsequent famine, have experienced severe trauma and should be closely observed for signs of the trauma syndrome.

Survivors of catastrophies frequently are haunted by guilt, survivors guilt, a psychological guilt--a questioning of why they have survived and a sense of responsibility for the death of family and friends. The survivors second-guess, review and question the past--"if only I had left sooner(or later); or taken a different road; or protected them better; they would not have died." This guilt can lead to a distrust of one's self and of others, a hardness and fear of emotions, to paranoia, self-hate and a lifetime of doubt and shame. It can also be displaced onto others as aggression either against ones family or society (Keller, 1975). Although numbers and details are unavailable, there have been reports of child and wife abuse among Khmer refugees, and some suicides.

Loss and grief are part of the Khmer refugee experience (Baskauskas, 1981). Not only the loss of loved ones but of a homeland, a familar panorama, patterns of behavior, habits and conduct, language, smells, climate, status and possessions. Such enormous losses create a need for grief and mourning which allows the sufferer to absorb the loss and to continue with life. For many refugees the process of grief is interrupted and delayed. During flight, while in the refugee camp, during the first period of resettlement the refugee is too busy and bewildered to engage in mourning. Grief and loss reactions do not appear until some later point in time when the enormity and finality of the multiple losses sink in. Depression and grief as well as an overwhelming nostalgia--remembering

home as perfect and finding fault with the new life--can be the result. For many Khmer refugees grief takes a normal and necessary course. But there is the danger that some will become frozen in grief and depression, they may drop out of the process of adjustment or try to escape the difficulties of resettlement through nostalgia or dreams and hopes of a return to Cambodia.

Another effect of trauma has been observed in survivors of the Kampuchean holocaust. A tenacity and aggressiveness, a willingness to take risks. Some refugees who have survived great danger develop a sense of invulnerability (Keller, 1975). They have been through the worst and survived. Nothing, no risk or venture can be more difficult than the past. Failure does not worry them. There are numerous stories of Khmer entrepeneurship that might be related to this invulnerability and willingness to take risks.

Children. Many refugees, confronted by the irreversible losses caused by exile, come to see their flight as having been for the sake of their children. The refugees transfer their hopes to the next generation. In many refugee groups the parents sacrifice for the sake of the kids and place a heavy responsibility on the children to do well in school and raise the status of the family and the refugee community. Parents often end up quite ambivalent about their children's progress--dependent on the child as a guide to the new land, proud of their scholastic achievements, but fearful of their rapid acculturation and angered at the lack of respect shown to both the parents and the old ways.

We know very little about the resettlement of the Khmer children but there is one speculation perhaps worthy of note. The children of the refugees suffered an interruption of almost five years in their education. Those Khmer children who were 10 to 15 years old when they arrived in the United States had this handicap added to the difficulties of learning a new language and adjustment to a very different school system. Young refugees often determine, by their progress, the status of their community for many years to come. The Khmer community is thus in a very

vulnerable position because of the years of lost education. The hopes and status of the Khmer community may have to rest with an even younger generation--those who were younger than 10 years old when they arrived in the United States. The Pol Pot years may continue to exact a high price and thus delay the progress and rise in status of the Khmer community.

Conclusion

It is too early to know how the Khmer refugees will do in the United States. The results so far are mixed and the prospects are also mixed. The scanty information we have thus far indicates that economically the Khmer refugees, in common with the other Indochinese refugee groups, are having a hard time but they are making progress. They continue to be heavily dependent on social services and welfare but we do not know if this dependency is permanent or part of their transition to self-sufficiency. The Khmer have certainly been hurt by the state of our economy. The 1975 Khmer cohort arrived during the worst recession since World War II, the more recent Khmer refugees are faced with even harder economic times. In addition, the budget cutting that has taken place since 1981, the time of the major Khmer influx, has severely curtailed social programs and services for refugees.

There are signs of hope in the progress of the early arrivals amongst the Indochinese refugees. There are however, significant differences between the 1975 cohort and the recent Khmer refugees so one cannot be certain the third Khmer resettlement wave's adjustment will follow the same pattern. Table 4 shows the great difficulties faced by new arrivals and the clear success of the early arrivals. "There is clear movement toward self-sufficiency by Southeast Asian refugee households. The ability of refugees to obtain employment grows steadily with the length of time refugees remain in the United States and with their increased English language proficiency" (ORR, 1982).

The Khmer refugees have made their first steps toward developing a Khmer community in the U.S. There are major concentrations of Khmer refugees in California, Texas, Oregon, Washington, and in the Washington, D.C. area. In all of these areas Cambodian Mutual Assistance Associations and Buddhist Temples play a major role of self-help, employment services, adjustment counseling, cultural maintenance and religious activities (Indochina Refugee Action Center, 1982).

It is important to have accurate expectations with regard to the resettlement of the Khmer in the U.S. Past experience with other refugee groups is that adjustment, economic, social and cultural, takes a great deal of time. With their handicaps as refugees and survivors of tyranny the Khmer refugees may take a bit longer. They have been here only a brief time but have made good progress thus far and are likely, in time, to do well.

TABLE 1

Resettlement of Khmer Refugees in the United States

	Number	% of Total	
1975	3,625	4.71%	
1976	1,301	1.69	8.18%
1977	25	.03	
1978	1,348	1.75	
1979	10,333	13.43	30.43%
1980	13,079	17.00	
1981	34,333	44.62	61.37%
1982 (through 31 August)	12,891	16.75	
Total	76,935		

In process for the U.S.

Bataan Refugee Processing Center	655
Galang Refugee Processing Center	3,568
Total	4,223

Source: Department of State, 1982.

TABLE 2

Education in Cambodia
Heads of Household

Cambodia composition Education	Survey I 1975 arrivals		Survey II 1975-77 arrivals		Survey III 2/3 1975-77 1/3 1979 arrivals		Survey IV 1975-Jan. 1980 arrivals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	28	20.4	23	13.2	60	26.2	80	37.0
Primary	11	8.0	66	37.7	36	15.7	44	20.4
Junior High School	31	22.6	31	17.7	33	14.4	35	16.2
Sub-Total		51.0%		68.6%		56.3%		73.6%
Secondary School	49	35.8	31	17.7	54	23.6	34	15.7
University	15	10.9	8	4.6	16	7.0	19	8.8
Sub-Total of Secondary and University		46.7%		22.3%		30.6%		24.5%
Other	3	2.2	16	9.1	30	13.1	4	1.9
Total	131		175		219		216	

Sources:

Survey I - Opportunity Systems, Inc. 1979b, Table 8.
Survey II - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1979a, Table 8.
Survey III - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1980, Table 8.
Survey IV - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1981, Table 8.

TABLE 3

English Proficiency of Cambodia Refugees 16 years or Older

Understand English	Survey I 1975 arrivals		Survey II 1975-77 arrivals		Survey III 2/3 1975-77 1/3 1979 arrivals		Survey IV 1975-Jan. 1980 arrivals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not at all	14	3.6	55	11.3	60	9.8	61	10.8
Some	264	68.8	339	69.9	366	59.9	386	68.3
Well	106	27.6	91	18.8	185	30.3	118	20.9
Total	384		485		611		565	

Sources:

Survey I - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1979b, Table 5.
Survey II - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1979a, Table 5.
Survey III - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1980, Table 5.
Survey IV - Opportunity Systems, Inc., 1981, Table 5.

TABLE 4

Current Employment Status of Indochinese Refugees

Year of Entry	Labor Force Participation	Unemployment
1981	22.8%	45.2%
1980	52.8%	27.1%
1979	49.2%	8.1%
1978	48.8%	5.0%
1976-7	70.7%	3.5%
1975	76.0%	6.4%
U.S. Rates	64.0%	7.5%

source: Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1982.

Footnotes

1. Being "eligible" for resettlement does not guarantee resettlement but it at least provides for that possibility. Eligibility means that a refugee is included in the pool of refugees from which those who are resettled are chosen.

2. Although few Khmer refugees reached Thailand during this period, mid 1975 until the end of 1978, there was an exodus of approximately 135,000 refugees from Kampuchea to Vietnam beginning in 1977. Many of the refugees were ethnic Vietnamese.

3. Thailand acted in this inhumane way for a variety of reasons including the fear that inadequate resettlement opportunities would leave it with a permanent burden of refugees as well as fear of a power vacuum inside a depopulated Kampuchea that would bring Vietnamese forces too close to Thailand. This refoulement, coupled with other events, led to an international refugee conference in July 1979 that produced pledges of over 260,000 resettlement places for Indochinese refugees. Thailand allowed the Kampuchean exodus to resume.

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